A Financial Issue, a Relationship Issue, or Both? Examining the Predictors of Marital Financial Conflict

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This study examines whether financial conflict arises because of financial difficulties, marital problems, or both. Using a recent nationally representative sample of over 1500 married couples, this study finds that economic pressure, communication issues, and deeper "hidden" issues within marriage are all associated with financial conflict. Specifically, economic pressure is positively associated with financial conflict. When spouses report satisfying communication, respect, commitment, and fairness and have equal levels of economic power, they report lower levels of financial conflict. These results suggest that financial conflict is a complex marital phenomenon that both marital therapists and financial counselors may help reduce.

Keywords: Dew; Stewart; marital financial conflict

Financial arguments are one of the most frequently occurring conflicts in marriage (Grable, Britt, & Cantrell, 2007; Oggins, 2003). Moreover, financial conflict is qualitatively different than other marital conflict. On average it is stronger, longer lasting, and predicts divorce better than other types of marital conflict (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Dew, Britt, & Huston, in press; Dew & Dakin, 2011; Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). In spite of these findings, few studies have investigated the predictors of financial arguments. One exception has suggested that communication problems are to blame (Britt, Huston, & Durband, 2010).

Although communication likely plays a role, couples' arguments about financial issues might also be rooted in economic pressure. Low levels of economic well-being may exacerbate financial conflicts as couples struggle to make ends meet. Economic stress is associated with generalized marital conflict (Dew, 2007; Gudmunson, Beutler, Israelsen, McCoy, & Hill, 2007), though it is unknown whether it is specifically linked to financial conflict.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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Financial conflict may also reflect "hidden" relationship issues (Jenkins, Stanley, Bailey, & Markman, 2002). Hidden relationship issues are "the unexpressed needs and feelings that, if not attended to, can cause great damage to [one's] marriage" (Jenkins et al., 2002, p. 58). Such issues may include power, commitment, respect, and fairness. These issues may manifest themselves as financial conflict if they lead couples to disagree about the best way to use their financial resources (Jenkins et al.; Shapiro, 2007; Stanley & Einhorn, 2007). Very few studies have empirically examined whether hidden relationship issues are related to financial conflict. This study tests the power of all three domains-economic well-being and pressure, communication, and "hidden" relationship issues–as predictors of financial conflict.

This study has potential to inform both practice and research. Rather than simply evaluating financial arguments at face value, an expanded understanding of financial conflict could better explain why they occur and why the fallout from such conflicts can be so costly to the marriage relationship. Such knowledge would provide practitioners with improved awareness of the underlying economic and relationship issues at the root of financial quarrels. If, for example, communication is the major contributor to financial conflict then marital therapists and marital educators would be the best equipped to help couples overcome them. If, however, financial conflicts are associated with economic pressure, then a byproduct of financial counseling might be a reduction in financial conflict (Zimmerman, 2010). Finally, if, as we suspect, financial conflict is related to economic pressure, communication issues, and hidden relationship issues then collaboration between marital therapists and financial counselors may be needed to help couples solve their problems (Aniol & Snyder, 1997).

We used data from the Survey of Marital Generosity (SMG), a nationally representative sample collected in December, 2010 - January 2011 (n = ~ 1,500 married couples). Upon final weighting, the data is nationally representative of married individuals between the ages of 18–45. Beyond being nationally representative, this data presents other advantages including the rich measures of marital quality and financial issues, and the fact that it is extremely contemporary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Family Stress Model of Economic Pressure and Marital Distress

The recession that started in 2008 has demonstrated the many financial difficulties that may affect families. Job loss, home foreclosure, lack of credit access, high levels of investment portfolio loss, and fuel and food price inflation, have all hit many families over the past several years. Financial difficulties may be one of the most straightforward reasons that couples fight over money. That is, as couples face financial difficulties, they increasingly fight about money.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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The family stress model of economic pressure and marital distress (or simply family stress model) captures the association between financial well-being (or lack thereof) and marital problems (Conger, Ge, & Lorenz, 1994). Although the family stress model was initially formulated using a Midwest regional economic crisis, later research has generalized it using national (Dew, 2007; Gudmunson et al., 2007) and international data (Falconier, 2010; Kwon, Rueter, Lee, Koh, & Ok, 2003). The family stress model posits that low levels of financial well-being or negative financial events lead to feelings of economic pressure. These feelings of economic pressure then lead spouses to feel negative affect such as depression, anxiety, and hostility. This negative affect finally results in increased marital conflict and decreased marital quality.

A number of financial indicators of economic well-being may predict economic pressure. Income is one obvious measure of financial well-being that should be associated with economic pressure. As income increases, the ability of individuals' to meet their financial needs increases. Not surprisingly, different measures of income have been shown to be negatively related to economic pressure (Conger et al., 1993; Mirowsky & Ross, 1999). Interestingly, however, direct tests of the association between income and financial conflict were not significant (Britt et al., 2010).

Research has also linked financial assets to lower levels of economic pressure. Savings, investments, and housing values have also been shown to be negatively associated with economic pressure (Dew, 2007). Financial assets have also been linked to lower levels of clinical depression and anxiety (Muntaner, Eaton, Diala, Kessler, & Sorlie, 1998). It is likely that financial assets give individuals a greater sense of economic security. That is, individuals with assets–especially liquid assets–may feel that even if they suffer an economic reversal, they can still fall back on their economic assets.

Conversely, financial liabilities are associated with higher levels of economic pressure. Debt payments constitute both a present expenditure and, as long as the debt remains, a future expense. Consumer debt is particularly problematic because it has a higher interest rate than other types of debt and it is particularly easy to obtain (Peterson, 2004). Consumer debt has been linked to economic pressure in prior research (Dew, 2007; Conger et al., 1993).

The family stress model suggests that economic pressure is linked to increasingly negative relationship affect (Conger et al., 1994) and behaviors (Gudmunson et al., 2007). This may be particularly the case for financial conflict. If the root of the marital distress is financial (e.g., too little income or too much debt), couples may fight over their finances more frequently. They may disagree on how to best stabilize their economic situation, or they may simply vent the negative affect that accompanies economic distress. Consequently, we expect that income and assets will be negatively associated with financial conflict and consumer debt will be positively associated with financial conflict. These associations will be mediated by economic pressure.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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Communication

Rather than financial pressure, some research suggests that financial conflict may be linked to communication issues. One way of defining communication is the ways in which spouses interact with each other. The ways in which spouses interact, especially when they disagree, are linked to conflict–especially financial conflict. As noted above, financial conflicts last longer and are harder to resolve than other types of conflict (Papp et al., 2009). Further, some studies have linked financial conflict to interaction styles that can be especially destructive to marriage (Dew et al., in press; Dew & Dakin, 2011).

An alternative way of framing communication is the actual sending and receiving of messages between spouses. In this context, the problem may not be actual financial issues, but poor communication skills. That is, poor communication skills may lead couples to fight about money. For example, one spouse may be unable to articulate needs and wants regarding money to the other spouse, or one spouse may not be able to accurately understand what their spouse is trying to tell them. These miscommunications may then result in financial conflict.

Only one study has tested whether communication is a predictor of financial conflict. Britt et al. (2010) found that generalized marital conflict, their proxy of costly communication, was the strongest predictor of financial conflict (Britt et al.). In other words, marital conflict in general was the best predictor of financial conflict. This may suggest that rather than being a financial issue, per se, financial conflict is a matter of poor communication skills.

Our measure of communication is broader than both definitions of communication. We asked participants how happy they were with the communication in the relationship. Because we did not define communication for the participants, however, they were free to interpret the question as they saw fit. Given the findings on both interactions on costly communications, we hypothesize that reports of satisfactory communication will be negatively associated with reports of financial conflict.

Financial Conflict Reflecting Hidden Relationship Issues

Although couples face financial strain, and although communication plays a prime role in marital quality, economic pressure and communication are probably not the only predictors of financial conflict. Financial conflict, or its absence, may also reflect deeper relationship issues such as power, fairness, respect, and commitment.

Couples' consumption, financial management, or ongoing financial events may trigger hidden relationship issues (Jenkins et al., 2002). Hidden relationship issues are deep, ongoing themes over which couples chronically disagree, sometimes throughout the entirety of their relationship. Jenkins et al. (pp. 58-59) noted that "money is a major issue for couples because it, like nothing else we know of, provides the screen on which couples

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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project all their deepest fears, hopes, and hurts in life." Other family therapists have confirmed this sentiment (Shapiro, 2007; Stanley & Einhorn, 2007). These deeper, invisible issues are challenging because they are difficult to identify and, consequently, difficult to resolve (Jenkins et al.). They may also be particularly difficult to overcome because each spouse may hold their own meaning for money and because the same marriage is often experienced differently through the eyes of each spouse.

We focus on four types of hidden issues for couples: power, fairness, commitment, and respect. Relationship power imbalances might provoke financial conflict (Jenkins et al., 2002). Distributive justice theory argues that when one individual in a relationship perceives an unequal circumstance to be unjust (i.e., an inequity) they will seek to alter that relationship dynamic (Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 2001; Thompson, 1991). One of the ways to change the dynamic regarding financial unfairness is to bring it up and/or argue about it. For example, if one spouse feels that they have less financial power in the relationship, they may argue with their spouse about expenditures. However, even when inequality occurs, if neither individual recognizes it as unjust (i.e., both think that the arrangements are fair) the partners are much less likely to try and change the relationship (Thompson, 1991). Thus, we expect that proxies of financial equality and reports of relationship fairness will be negatively associated with reports of financial conflict.

Commitment may also be associated with financial conflict. The more committed individual spouses are to their spouse and their relationship, the more they are willing to invest in it (Stanley et al., 2002). This includes financially investing in the relationship. Couples who are more committed to making their relationship work are more likely to merge their bank accounts and even buy homes together (Kenney, 2006; Schaninger & Buss, 1986; Treas, 1993). Spouses who engage in joint financial goals may signal commitment to each other and may show that they are interested in continuing a long-term relationship (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010; Weiselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Signals of commitment to staying in the marriage may allow couples to fight less. On the other hand, couples who fight about finances may be fighting about concerns over commitment, rather than about the actual management of their finances. For example, commitment issues may underlie fights over whether or not to join their finances (Jenkins et al., 2002). Thus, we expect commitment to be negatively associated with financial conflict.

Finally, feelings of receiving little respect from one's spouse may be associated with financial conflict. If an individual feels that they receive little respect from their spouse, they may use financial conflict as a way to fight about these deeper issues. More directly, some individuals, both men and women, may tie feelings of self-worth to their prowess as providers. If they do not feel that they receive the respect and appreciation from their spouse for these provider efforts, this may cause problems in the relationship (Jenkins et al., 2002). Alternatively, if one spouse loses the ability to provide, they may lose respect from their spouse. Increased financial conflict may result. Thus, we expect that reports of receiving respect from their spouse will be negatively associated with financial conflict.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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METHOD

Data and Sample

The data for this study were taken from the Marital Generosity Survey. The Marital Generosity Survey was conducted between December 2010 and February 2011. Participants were drawn from the Knowledge Networks Panel, a nationally representative sample of individuals. The Knowledge Networks Panel is based on a stratified random sample that used both random digit dialing and address based sampling.

To be part of the Marital Generosity Survey, participants in the Knowledge Networks Panel had to be married and between the ages of 18–45 (spouses could be up to 55 years old). Further, the spouses' ages had to be within ten years of each other. The Marital Generosity Survey obtained responses from 1,705 husbands and 1,754 wives. Of these participants, 1,630 were married to each other, whereas 199 were married, but did not have a participating spouse. We used the participants in the Marital Generosity Survey who did not have missing data for the analyses (those with missing data were listwise deleted) and whose spouse participated. The final sample size for each analysis is noted in the tables.

Measures

Dependent variables. The main dependent variable was a measure of how frequently couples argue about their finances. The survey asked, "How often, if at all, in the last year have you had open disagreements about each of the following?" Money was one of the options. The response set was from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*Almost Every Day*).

Independent variables. Income, assets, and consumer debt were measured on scales and were reported by both husbands and wives. Household income was measured on a 19-point scale that ranged from 1 (*Less than $5,000*) to 19 (*$175,000 or more*). Assets were assessed by a question that asked, "What is the approximate total value of your savings, including things like savings accounts, money market shares, and CD's?" Thus, this question asks about liquid assets and savings. Consumer debt was measured by a question that said, "How much debt do you owe on credit card or charge accounts, installment loans, or bills that you've owed for over two months? Do not include vehicle loans or home mortgage debt." Assets and consumer debt were both measured on a 12-point scale that went from 1 (*None)* to 12 (*$250,000 or more*). Wives' and husbands' reports of savings were correlated at .79 ($p < .001$). Their reports of consumer debt were correlated at .77 ($p < .001$). Their reports of household income were perfectly correlated. This suggests that wives and husbands were quite similar in their reports of the household financial situation.

Economic pressure was measured through a question that asked, "How often do you worry that your total family income <u>will not</u> be enough to meet your family's expenses and bills?" Participants could respond from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Almost all the time*).

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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From the data, we could only derive proxies for equal marital financial power. These two proxies were equal earnings and shared financial management. These were measured using two dichotomous variables. Because we wanted actual measures of relative relationship financial power, these two variables were measured on a couple level. If both the husband and wife reported that they earned between 40%–60% of the households' income the dummy variable for equal income was coded as 1. It was 0 otherwise. If both husbands and wives reported that they shared financial management duties equally they got a 1 for that variable.

Three of the measures–communication, respect, and fairness–were taken from questions that asked how happy couples were with these aspects of their relationship. That is, participants were asked to rate how happy they were about the communication, respect, and fairness they felt in the relationship. The communication question specifically stated "the quality of communication between you and your spouse." The respect question asked, "the respect and admiration you receive from your spouse." The fairness question asked, "the degree of fairness in your marriage." The fairness question was a general measure of equity, and not one that was specifically linked to financial fairness. The responses ranged from 1 (*Very Unhappy*) to 5 (*Very Happy*).

Commitment was a summed scale of four items regarding how committed individuals were to their marriage and spouse. These questions asked participants about their level of agreement or disagreement to statements like, "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we encounter." Participants could respond from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .81 for both husbands and wives.

Finally, we included control covariates that have been shown to be related to marital conflict or the main independent variables in past research. These covariates included age, age at marriage, education, number of marriages, and race.

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for each of the variables. On average, both wives and husbands infrequently fought about money. The mean was 2.27 for wives and 2.28 for husbands. This corresponds to fighting about money between less than once per month and several times per month. Couples' mean reported economic pressure was right at the midpoint of the scale at 3. Participants' mean communication satisfaction, commitment, and reports of respect and fairness were all at fairly high levels. Sixteen percent of couples shared their financial management equally; 22% of the participants were in couples where the wives and husbands earned about the same amount of income. The mean age for couples was in the mid-30's.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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Table 1
Sample Descriptive Statistics

Individually Reported Variables						
	Wives			Husbands		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
Financial Conflict	2.27	1.14	1 – 6	2.28	1.13	1 – 6
Income	12.87	3.76	1 – 19	12.84	3.69	1 – 19
Assets	4.81	3.20	1 – 12	4.96	3.22	1 – 12
Consumer Debt	3.66	2.36	1 – 12	3.66	2.33	1 – 12
Economic Pressure	3.01	1.18	1 – 5	2.99	1.23	1 – 5
Communication	3.70	1.06	1 – 5	3.85	.97	1 – 5
Commitment	16.97	2.80	4 – 20	16.96	2.75	4 – 20
Respect	3.95	1.03	1 – 5	3.98	.99	1 – 5
Fairness	3.93	1.00	1 – 5	4.00	.91	1 – 5
Age	35.24	6.41	18 – 45	36.02	5.93	19 – 45
Age at Marriage	24.59	5.21	14 – 45	26.05	4.96	15 – 44
Education	10.50	1.96	3 – 14	10.32	2.01	1 – 14
Number of Marriages	1.14	.41	1 – 4	1.14	.40	1 – 4
Black[a]	.06	.25	0 – 1	.07	.26	0 – 1
Hispanic[a]	.17	.38	0 – 1	.19	.39	0 – 1
Other Race[a]	.09	.29	0 – 1	.08	.29	0 – 1

Couple Level Variables			
	Mean	SD	Range
Share Financial Management	.16	.37	0 – 1
Equal Earnings	.22	.42	0 – 1

[a] Omitted category is White, Not Hispanic

Analysis

Data were analyzed using least square regressions. We weighted these analysis using post-stratification weights to make the analyses nationally representative of married couples between the ages of 18-45. All of the regressions included the control covariates. The sample sizes for each regression are indicated in the results tables.

Our first hypothesis suggested that economic well-being would be associated with financial conflict, but that these relationships would be mediated by feelings of economic pressure. To establish the mediation model for economic pressure, we first had to show

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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that income, assets, and consumer debt were associated with financial strain (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Consequently, the first regression analysis to regress economic pressure on income, assets, consumer debt, and the control covariates was used to establish whether the measures of financial well-being were indeed associated with economic pressure. We next examined whether assets, consumer debt, and income were associated with financial conflict. We then added economic pressure. We considered mediation to be demonstrated if adding economic pressure reduced the association between financial well-being and financial conflict (Baron & Kenny, 1986), though we also tested the model using post-hoc Sobel tests to ensure that the mediation model was plausible.

Our next hypotheses involved communication and the hidden relationship issues of power, fairness, commitment, and respect. We first added satisfaction with communication to the regression model that included financial well-being and economic pressure. Next, we added the variables that measured power, fairness, commitment and respect. Thus, the final regression model contained all of the variables that we believed would predict financial conflict.

We ran the models for wives and husbands separately because their data was by couples. Although wives and husbands each answered their own survey, using clustered data in regression can be problematic. When data are clustered, they typically violate the regression assumption of uncorrelated error. This often results in suppressed standard errors for the regression coefficients and a corresponding increase in the likelihood of committing a Type I error. To mitigate this risk, we elected to run the wives' and husbands' data separately.

RESULTS

Economic Pressure

The first analysis modeled the financial well-being measures as predictors of feelings of economic pressure. Not surprisingly, we found that for both wives (b = -.05, p < .001) and husbands (b = -.06, p < .001) income was negatively associated with feelings of economic pressure (see Table 2). Assets were also negatively associated with economic pressure for wives (b = -.12, p < .001) and husbands (b = -.08, p < .001). Consumer debt was positively associated with financial strain (b = .14, p < .001), for both wives and husbands.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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Table 2
Weighted Least Squares Predictors of Wives' and Husbands' Economic Pressure

	Wives (n = 1,632)			Husbands (n = 1,444)		
	b	*StE*	*β*	*b*	*StE*	*β*
Intercept	2.77***	.21		3.84***	.24	
Income	-.05***	.01	-.16	-.06***	.01	-.19
Assets	-.12***	.01	-.32	-.08***	.01	-.22
Consumer Debt	.14***	.01	.27	.14***	.01	.26
Age	.03***	.01	.15	.02***	.005	.09
Age at Marriage	-.02**	.005	-.08	-.01	.01	-.01
Education	.02	.02	.03	-.07***	.01	-.11
Number of Marriages	.16*	.07	.05	-.07	.07	-.02
Black[a]	.01	.11	.01	.28*	.11	.06
Hispanic[a]	-.02	.07	-.01	-.17*	.07	-.05
Other Race[a]	.10	.09	.02	.16	.11	.03
R^2	.27			.27		

[a] Omitted category is White, Not Hispanic
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Next, we examined whether the indicators of financial well-being were associated with financial conflict. For wives (see Table 3, Model 1), assets (b = -.05, p < .001) and consumer debt (b = .09, p < .001) were the only variables in the model that predicted financial conflict. The same pattern was true for husbands' assets (b = -.06, p < .001) and consumer debt (b = .08, p < .001), though education (b = -.06, p < .001) was also negatively associated with financial conflict. Income was not associated with financial conflict.

Finally, we added economic pressure to the models (see Table 3, Model 2). The inclusion of this variable almost tripled the variance explained in the wives' model and nearly doubled the variance explained in the husbands' model. In line with expectations, economic pressure was strongly and positively associated with financial conflict among wives (b = .42, p < .001) and husbands (b = .30, p < .001). Further, when it was added to the model, the asset and consumer debt coefficients were reduced by one-half to two-thirds; the coefficient for wives' assets became non-significant. Post-hoc Sobel tests (not shown) suggested that economic pressure does indeed mediate the association between assets, consumer debt, and financial conflict (p < .001 for both wives and husbands).

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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Communication

To test whether communication predicted financial conflict, we simply added it to the model (see Table 3, Model 3). Adding communication increased the variance explained by 5% for wives and 6% for husbands. Communication satisfaction was negatively associated with financial conflict for wives (b = -.24, p < .001) and husbands (b = -.29, p < .001). This supported our expectations regarding communication.

Hidden Relationship Issues

Finally, we added the other relationship issue variables (Table 3, Model 4). These variables increased the variance explained by 2% for both husbands and wives. Unexpectedly, when the relationship issues were in the model, communication did not predict financial conflict for wives. Equal earnings (b = -.15, p < .01), a proxy for relationship power, commitment (b = -.05, p < .01), and respect (b = -.16, p < .01) negatively predicted financial conflict for wives. Thus, wives who earned between 40%–60% of the family income, who had high levels of personal commitment to the marriage, or who were happy with the amount of respect they got from their husbands, reported fighting about money less often.

Some of the findings were similar in the husbands' relationship issues model, though there were some differences. First, like wives, commitment (b = -.03, p < .01) and respect (b = -.12, p < .01) were negatively associated with financial conflict. Unlike wives however, equal earnings was not associated with husbands' reports of the frequency of financial conflict. Further, communication satisfaction (b = -.10, p < .05) and fairness (b = -.12, p < .01) were negatively associated with the frequency of financial conflict. These findings supported the idea that hidden relationship issues may also relate to financial conflict.

Examining the standardized coefficients in the fourth model suggests that economic pressure was the strongest predictor of financial conflict for both wives (β = .39) and husbands (β = .27). For wives, respect (β = -.15) and commitment (β = -.13) were the next strongest. For husbands, many predictors were about at the same level, including respect (β = -.11), fairness (β = -.09), communication (β = -.08), consumer debt (β = .08), education (β= -.08), and age (β = -.08).

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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Table 3
Weighted Least Squares Models Wives' and Husbands' Reports of Financial Conflict

	Model 1						Model 2					
	Wives (n = 1,626)			Husbands (n = 1,441)			Wives (n = 1,624)			Husbands (n = 1,439)		
	b	*StE*	*β*	*b*	*StE*	*β*	*b*	*StE*	*β*	*b*	*StE*	*β*
Intercept	2.66***	.23		3.17***	.25		1.44***	.22		2.00***	.26	
Income	-.01	.01	-.01	-.01	.01	-.03	.02*	.01	.06	.01	.01	.03
Assets	-.05***	.01	-.14	-.06***	.01	-.17	-.01	.01	-.01	-.03**	.01	-.09
Consumer Debt	.09***	.01	.18	.08***	.01	.17	.03*	.01	.05	.04**	.01	.08
Economic Pressure	--	--	--	--	--	--	.42***	.02	.44	.30***	.03	.33
Communication	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Share Financial Management	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Equal Earnings	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Commitment	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Respect	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Fairness	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Age	-.01	.01	-.03	-.01	.01	-.01	-.02***	.004	-.10	-.01	.01	-.04
Age at Marriage	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.03	.01	.01	.03	.01	.01	.03
Education	-.03	.02	-.05	-.06***	.02	-.11	-.04*	.02	-.07	-.04**	.02	-.08
Number of Marriages	.08	.08	.03	-.18*	.08	-.06	.01	.07	.04	-.15*	.07	-.06
Black[a]	.11	.12	.02	-.14	.12	-.03	.11	.11	.02	-.23*	.11	-.05
Hispanic[a]	.05	.08	.02	-.07	.08	-.02	.06	.07	.02	-.02	.07	-.01
Other[a]	-.14	.10	-.03	.13	.11	.03	-.17	.09	-.04	.08	.11	.02
R^2	.08			.10			.22			.18		

[a] Omitted category is White, Not Hispanic, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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Table 3 continued

	Model 3						Model 4					
	Wives (n = 1,621)			Husbands (n = 1,433)			Wives (n = 1,613)			Husbands (n = 1,424)		
	b	*StE*	*β*	*b*	*StE*	*β*	*b*	*StE*	*β*	*b*	*StE*	*β*
Intercept	2.54***	.24		3.25***	.28		3.39***	.26		4.17***	.31	
Income	.01	.01	.04	.01	.01	.03	.02*	.01	.07	.01	.01	.03
Assets	.01	.01	.01	-.02*	.01	-.06	.01	.01	.02	-.01	.01	-.06
Consumer Debt	.01	.01	.08	.04***	.01	.08	.01	.01	.03	.04***	.01	.08
Economic Pressure	.39***	.02	.40	.26***	.03	.28	.38***	.02	.39	.25***	.03	.27
Communication	-.24***	.02	-.23	-.29***	.03	-.25	-.01	.04	-.01	-.10*	.04	-.08
Share Financial Management	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.10	.07	-.03	-.09	.07	-.03
Equal Earnings	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.15**	.06	-.06	.01	.06	.01
Commitment	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.05***	.01	-.13	-.03***	.01	-.07
Respect	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.16***	.04	-.15	-.12**	.04	-.11
Fairness	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.06	.04	-.06	-.12**	.04	-.09
Age	-.02***	.004	-.09	-.01*	.005	-.06	-.02***	.004	-.10	-.02**	.005	-.08
Age at Marriage	.01	.01	.04	.01	.01	.02	.01	.01	.05	.01	.01	.04
Education	-.04*	.02	-.06	-.04**	.02	-.07	-.03*	.01	-.05	-.05**	.02	-.08
Number of Marriages	-.01	.07	-.01	-.12	.07	-.04	.01	.06	.01	-.10	.07	-.04
Black[a]	.12	.10	.03	-.21*	.10	-.05	.17	.10	.04	-.14	.11	-.03
Hispanic[a]	.09	.07	.03	-.02	.07	-.01	.08	.07	.03	-.04	.07	-.01
Other[a]	-.17	.09	-.04	.05	.10	.02	-.23**	.09	-.06	.08	.10	.02
R^2	.27			.24			.29			.26		

[a] Omitted category is White, Not Hispanic, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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DISCUSSION

This study examined predictors of the frequency of financial conflict among contemporary married couples between the ages of 18–45. Economic pressure, communication satisfaction, and "hidden" relationship issues such as power, commitment, respect, and fairness were all associated with financial conflict. Some gender differences emerged. For example, although communication satisfaction and fairness negatively predicted husbands' reports of economic conflict, they did not predict wives' reports. Equal earnings (a proxy of relationship power) were negatively associated with wives' reports of economic conflict, but did not predict husbands' reports.

Overall, this study shows that financial conflict is a complex issue that may arise because of multiple reasons. First, indicators of economic well-being and financial behaviors predicted financial conflict. Assets were negatively associated with financial conflict, whereas consumer debt was positively associated with it. Income was not statistically significant. As expected from the family stress model, economic pressure mediated the association between assets, debt, and financial conflict. The mediation was complete in the case of wives' assets, but was only partial in the case of wives' and husbands' consumer debt and husbands' assets. Further, in the full model (Table 3, Model 4), feelings of economic pressure were the strongest predictor of financial conflict for both husbands and wives.

Interestingly, even after adding all of the relationship variables, husbands' reports of consumer debt were still associated with their reports of financial conflict. The magnitude of the standardized coefficient in the final model put consumer debt equal to communication and age. This suggests that consumer debt is more salient to husbands' perceptions of financial conflict than wives. One reason that this may be the case is that husbands were responsible for earning the majority of the income for their families. Husbands earned 76% of the income, on average, in the sample. Further, 31% of the couples were in a husband single-earner household compared with 4% who were in wife single-earner households. Consequently, because consumer debt reduces future discretionary income, it may be that husbands, who were responsible for earning the majority of the income, were more upset by it. These gendered findings regarding consumer debt merit additional research.

Overall, these findings relating economic well-being and economic pressure to financial conflict suggest that the less financially stable a couple feels, the more they will fight about their finances. That economic pressure was a partial mediator and was the largest predictor of financial conflict is important, as couples at all levels of the economic spectrum can experience economic pressure. It is only at a certain level of economic stability that individuals can have access to traditional lines of consumer credit, for example, and increases in income are typically associated with increased consumption (Crook, 2001; Maki, 2000). Thus, although lower levels of financial well-being are correlated with economic pressure, any couple can spend more than they earn and experience economic pressure.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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Practically, this finding suggests that as financial therapists, planners, and counselors help couples to increase their financial stability and meet their financial goals, an unintended benefit might be that their marriages improve as well. That is, as couples feel more economically secure as they implement a financial plan, they may fight less over their finances and experience increased marital quality. One study has already found that couples involved in financial counseling have reported improved marital quality (Zimmerman, 2010). Additional studies on this spillover effect of financial counseling on marital quality merits additional research.

Financial well-being and economic pressure were not the only predictors of financial conflict, however. Communication was negatively associated with financial conflict, for both husbands and wives, but remained statistically significant only for husbands in the full model. That communication was not the strongest predictor of reports of financial conflict differs from the finding of Britt et al. (2010) who found that "costly communication" was the strongest predictor of financial conflict for married women. The difference in findings may stem from the variables used to measure communication. The variable that we used was a measure of satisfaction with communication in the relationship. The variable that Britt et al. used was a general marital conflict scale. Further, we had additional measures, like hidden relationship issues, that Britt et al. did not have.

One finding that is unexplained, though, is why husbands' communication satisfaction would remain significant in the full model whereas wives' communication satisfaction did not. Adding the hidden relationship issues made the association between wives' communication satisfaction and their reports of financial conflict to become non-significant. The different domains of wives' marriages may be more closely related to each other, on average, whereas husbands may compartmentalize the different aspects of their relationship more. It may be that power and respect are more closely related to wives' communication satisfaction than to husbands' communication satisfaction. Thus, when these issues are in the matter they share more variance with wives' communication satisfaction. The role of communication in financial conflict remains unclear and necessitates additional research.

Finally, some of the hidden relationship issues were associated with financial conflict. Commitment and respect were negatively associated with financial conflict for both husbands and wives. The more committed wives and husbands were to their spouse, the less they reported fighting about money. Financial conflict may arise when one spouse infers a lack of commitment to the relationship in their spouse's financial actions (Jenkins et al., 2002). Alternatively, commitment to making their relationship work may simply help spouses avoid potentially problematic relationship behaviors (Stanley et al., 2002).

Respect also was associated with lower reports of financial conflict. The more satisfied with the respect that spouses received from their spouse, the less they reported fighting about money. This might indicate that individuals who feel appreciated by their spouse are less likely to fight about money. It may be, for example, that when a husband or wife feels respected for their contributions to their family's bottom line, they are less likely

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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to fight about money (Jenkins et al., 2002). In the reverse scenario, when a spouse does not feel respected for his or her financial contributions, it may make financial conflict more likely.

Equal earnings were negatively associated with financial conflict for wives. Because equal earnings were a proxy for financial decision making power, this suggests that when wives feel that they have less financial power, financial conflict may result. Contemporary women may be sensitive to historical laws and social norms that put men in charge of the family finances (Zelizer, 1994). When they perceive that they have less financial decision-making power, conflict may result. Interestingly, our second proxy for shared financial power–shared financial management–was not significant. Thus, it may be that it does not matter who pays the bills or balances the checkbook; what matters is that wives feel that they have input into the family financial arrangements (Skogrand, Johnson, Horrocks, & DeFrain, 2011).

Finally, satisfaction with relationship fairness negatively predicted financial conflict for husbands. Thus, husbands may use financial conflict when they perceive that their relationships are unfair. It may also be also be possible that the direction of this relationship is the opposite of what we tested. It may be that husbands' perceptions of relationship unfairness may provoke more frequent financial conflict (Dew et al., in press).

All of these findings suggest that deeper relationship issues can indeed manifest themselves through financial conflict, even after controlling for the effects of economic pressure and communication. Thus, financial conflicts may serve as proxies for hidden relationship problems. Some couples may simply not be consciously aware of the issues that underlie their financial conflicts. Alternatively, fighting about finances may be easier, more socially acceptable, or safer for the relationship than fighting about deeply rooted relationship problems (Jenkins et al., 2002).

This study had limitations that may be able to be rectified in future research. One of the main limitations of these findings is that the data was cross-sectional. Without longitudinal data we certainly cannot make any causal claims or make any claims related to the directionality of effects. For example, it is not implausible to wonder whether frequent financial conflict may reduce marital commitment rather than the other way around. Although we did base the analysis on theory, longitudinal data is needed, at the very least, to establish directionality of the effects.

Another limitation was that some of our measures were either not multi-item scales or as specific as they could have been. Some of our measures were single-item measures, thus the constructs could have been measured more strongly. Further, other measures were not super-specific about the construct it was measuring. For example, because we asked about communication satisfaction, we do not know whether it is measuring communication skills, relationship interaction, some other aspect of communication, or all of them together. The item on respect had the same problem.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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In spite of these limitations, these findings validate a model where both marital and financial experts work together to help clients. On one hand, financial counselors can help their clients reduce economic pressure by engaging in sound financial management. This may have a salutatory effect on a client's marriage (Zimmerman, 2010). On the other hand, marital therapists are uniquely qualified to help spouses uncover and work through the hidden issues that are troubling their marriage. Other implications may be a little more subtle. For example, if couples visit a financial therapist/counselor because of financial stress, they may also be facing marital problems arising from financial conflict. Such conflict may make it harder for couples to agree on an action plan to improve their finances or may prevent them from fully implementing such a plan. In this case, both a marital therapist and financial counselor may need to help the couple work out their problems. Finally, these findings suggest a more complete model of financial conflict to researchers–one in which financial conflict arises from multiple dimensions of family life.

ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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ISSN: 1945-7774
DOI: 10.4148/jft.v3i1.1605
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